

Foundation of All Good Qualities
Thirteenth teaching
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Dhargyey Buddhist Centre

Going for Refuge

Resuming from where we left off I would like to reiterate what it says. It says,

Once you realise the present predicament and future predicament we have no option but to wholeheartedly turn to the three jewels for guidance so at least in the immediate next lifetime we won't fall down into the three lower realms of existence, for us to have a chance to reconnect with the path.

Talking about that, I would like to elaborate a little more on this. Incidentally, I have to say that we are not going to be able to finish this text, the foundation of all good qualities. It is a text which can be done in two days, or it could be done for an incredible length of time. I'm going to choose to emphasise certain points.

Tonight is the last teaching for the year and in order to create serendipitous karma for Dharma to prevail in our life, I would like to talk about refuge today and then do some meditation and conclude the years teaching tonight.

Going through this text by Lama Tsong Khapa, the commentary of which was written by Kyabje Pabongkha, this text has stressed time and again that we need to practice Dharma. And how do we practice Dharma? The practice of Dharma is done in terms of elimination of negative thoughts, actions and proactive cultivation and doing of positive actions of body speech and mind. Knowing what is to be done, then we need to apply ourselves to the practice. Further, knowing that when we exit this life when the mind exits or leaves this body, the mind has only two avenues open to it when it takes an involuntary rebirth and the quality of rebirth in the next lifetime is determined completely by actions of virtue or nonvirtues.

Bearing on this mind, knowing that if you don't practice we remain ever susceptible and vulnerable to getting caught in the three lower realms. So we need to understand and feel the vulnerability. But just feeling the vulnerability and getting petrified and doing nothing about it is not good. The purpose of reflection is to nudge us to turn to the three jewels.

The three jewels are indeed our refuge, as is taught by many other great beings and by the Buddha himself. Succinctly, Acharya Chandrakirti in his writing called the 70 Stanzas on Refuge, says "*Buddha, Dharma Sangha are refuges for those who seek permanent liberation.*" In what way is that the three jewels are refuges for those seeking permanent liberation? How is that explained? It is explained with reference to the philosophy of selflessness.

The View of Selflessness

Why is attaining liberation dependent on the view of selflessness? It is dependent on the view of selflessness in that all other delusions, mental distortions, negative emotions, they all stem from one simple distorted notion of true existence or conception that everything has some intrinsic nature. Since the philosophy of selflessness incisively cuts through that notion and thereby attains liberation. Our achievement of liberation is dependent on that.

This cutting edge philosophy that directly contradicts the ultimate distortion is taught by the three jewels, particularly by the Buddha. What makes someone Buddha? What makes someone Buddha is the jewel of Dharma, and the jewel of Dharma particularly refers to true cessation and true path. True path is the actual antidote, and Buddha stems from jewel of Dharma. When somebody becomes Buddha, their person becomes jewel of Sangha, and that Sanghahood of that person again stems from the jewel of Dharma.

If the jewel of Buddha and Sangha are dependent on Dharma, what is Dharma? Briefly jewel of Dharma is that wisdom which dispels confusion in the mind, ignorance of the mind that prevents the mind from knowing phenomena or things.

To give an example, the knowledge of the alphabet of a language dispels the ignorance of the alphabet prior to learning. Even if the characters of alphabet were presented to a person not knowing them in big form, they wouldn't know what the letters stand for. At that point, what is in the mind? The mind is filled with ignorance of the alphabet. When the learner understands the alphabet, that understanding clearly has dispelled that prior ignorance. In the same way the dichotomy of knowledge and ignorance applies to all other things.

As for ignorance, there are two types: ignorance of merely not knowing something or ignorance of active vehement distortion of something. It is the latter, active vehement distortion of reality, that underlies the experience of suffering. For example, the mind that distortedly believes in something, it could be to believe in something non-existent as existent, and vice versa. And believe it in a really deep and forceful way – this is ignorance.

In this way, our case of the latter type of ignorance is not mere absence of knowledge of reality, it is complete distortion of reality and believing that the distortion is correct and be guided, be influenced by that distortion. For example, there is the distortion that self exists, truly.

How can the distortion in the mind, the distorted mind that believes in self, be overcome? It can only be overcome by cultivating a diametrically opposed perspective of selflessness. If the mind believes in self of self and self of phenomena, that vehement belief that things are self-instituted, independent of any other factors can only be rectified by coming to realise that in fact things have never had any type of selfhood, inherent selfhood about them. Once that realisation dawns in the mind, that will directly counteract, immediately sever the distortion at the root.

Why is it that we have to cultivate and develop an awareness or knowledge of selflessness of phenomena and person? We have to think, what would happen if we really believed ignorance and followed suit? What would be the consequence, what would be the cost of such a belief? What are the advantages or disadvantages of the notion of selflessness? We need to weigh the pros and cons of the two fundamentally opposed belief systems with respect to a particular phenomenon or phenomena.

It says, if one spent time rationalising whether belief in self-existence or self of phenomena, self of person is tenable or not and as one precisely understands what self-existence means and what would it mean if things actually existed? If things actually existed in an inherent way, then it would dawn on that kind of enquiring mind that it is practically untenable, as it would be contradicted by so many absurdities that would fly in the face of a common-sensical and enquiring mind. Therefore the mind would resolve in itself that things could never have true independent nature. Things must be empty of inherent nature for the other one doesn't stack up, there are no grounds, there is no support. It is all based on sandy foundation.

What you have to do is, we have to train the mind to develop the notion, the philosophy, the principle of selflessness. At the moment, our mind is overwhelmingly swayed by the notion of true existence. We base all our choices on that notion. Following the teachings which claim, which establish that things could never have true or self-existence considering this absurd consequences. Therefore we have no option but to cultivate the notion of selflessness. In the beginning if you put the two notions on the two pans of the scale, the notion of self-existence would weigh so heavily. Gradually when we begin to understand selflessness more and our understanding deepens, the notion of selflessness would counteract the weight and as a result, because they cannot co-exist at the same time, when one goes down the other has to go up and so on. Ultimately, we will be left with the notion of emptiness.

The mind that knows and the mind that doesn't know are both equally mind. But they have different perspectives. Indeed they cannot coexist. When one become stronger, the other one becomes weak. When I came to New Zealand, I was filled with huge ignorance of English. If someone said to me, let's go to the beach, a great proposition, I wouldn't have understood, I wouldn't have taken advantage to see New Zealand beaches. Now I have learned some English and the meagre knowledge of my English has cut through the profound ignorance of English at the beginning.

In this way, my example really applies to our endeavour of Dharma practice. The purpose of Dharma practice ultimately is to free the mind from suffering, for which the mind needs to be freed from the vehement distortion of ignorance. The only way that will set the mind free of that confusion is the development of the knowledge of emptiness of inherent existence and so on.

We really have to make effort to familiarise the mind with virtues, with the knowledge of selflessness, with the knowledge of the counteracting knowledge of emptiness of inherent nature. When we are told that things do not exist truly, in the beginning we had difficulty coming to terms with such a notion that seeing is not believing. Seeing is believing up to a point, but there is something beyond that and therefore our perception is coloured by ignorance, by things having true existence. It is difficult at the beginning to come to terms with that statement. But in time, the knowledge becomes more familiar, it grows upon us and given that things never remain permanently, eternally difficult they can grow on us through familiarity. If that is the case, then we need to cultivate the mind that understands emptiness.

As we have been told time and again, we have taken many rebirths as if we have been born to achieve something. But, each time we are reborn we were reborn profoundly affected by the distortion that things have true nature or that things exist truly. That distortion has profoundly veiled the mind from seeing the truth and as a result despite the fact that we have taken so many rebirths, as if each rebirth has a purpose to achieve, the purpose of Buddhahood, yet we have not achieve Buddhahood even after taking so many lifetimes. Simply because the mind is blocked, blinded, veiled by distortion. That distortion makes one believe it is the truth, and to believe that has cost a lot. But we can take heart that this time we have been born a human with special qualities, whose lives are characterised by special advantages for spiritual awakening. If only we keep doing our practice, things will get better.

As Lamrim teachings stress, that now is the time to make the significant difference, a watershed difference because this life is heaped upon by dint of one's own positive karma in the previous lifetimes. It is heaped upon with unbelievably rare advantages which other life-forms, which other human beings do not have; advantages which really can help us accelerate our spiritual growth. Before we lose these advantages with death, make haste whilst we have these advantages. If we do tap into the advantages that enhance our spiritual growth, then it makes the matter of connecting with

another similar lifetime quite easy and therefore one will move from strength to strength in all subsequent lifetimes. Therefore it will be a kind of plain sailing towards Buddhahood.

However it has to be born in mind, the moment we began to do Dharma practice we cannot expect quick tangible outcomes, spiritual realisations as tangible outcomes. However, any attempt we make in reading in learning in doing Dharma practice, they live indelible imprints on our mind and these indelible imprints are so precious. Although they do not make any substantial difference now, they are the key to quick spiritual awakening in the future lifetimes. Those who have made it to Buddhahood, they do the same thing, it is just receiving the sediment of positive propensities that the mind becomes so fertile for quick awakening.

Finally we need to see the two minds, the mind that believes in self existence of self and phenomena and the mind that doesn't believe, that utterly disbelieves in self and self of all phenomena. Which of these two minds are likely to prevail? In time, the mind that understands or believes in selflessness of self – selflessness here refers to emptiness of inherent existence of self as a person and selflessness of other phenomena – that mind will prevail. The mind that believes in distortion will weaken. Why? Because it is built on erroneous ground. That which is erroneous will only become weaker with the correct knowledge of the situation and having no substantial base, it is bound to become weaker, it has no irrefutable support to make it clear. Whereas the mind that disbelieves in selflessness, that will gain force and strength. Why? It is based on fact. That which is based on fact will remain irrefutable and as a result the more one observes that which is based on fact, the more evident and apparent it becomes until it becomes directly empirical. As a result, that which is grounded in reality will become empirical at the end and that which is grounded in distortion will disappear.

The mind that believes in selfless or true existence is based on non-fact, based on errors. Therefore that which is fundamentally wrong cannot become correct as it doesn't have valid irrefutable evidence and support. On the other hand, the notion of selflessness, despite its opaque nature in the beginning, the opaqueness will disappear. Why? That which is based on real truth can only become more apparent the more you delve into it.

Because the notion of selflessness has got valid support, valid evidence to prove its truthfulness, its validity, it will only become more apparent, clearer and it will become empirical. Of course in the beginning, we need to immerse ourselves in the teaching. In the beginning we will hear information. As soon as we hear the information that things have no selfhood, no inherent self-nature and that it is a distortion, we gain some knowledge though hearing, through exposure. Then as one entertains the notion of selflessness and also entertains reflection on the fallacies of ignorance, then as one contemplates the reasons for and against the two, your wisdom will deepen through contemplation.

As one keeps reflecting on the intellectual understanding of selflessness, in time selflessness would become more and more apparent, the veiling factors which blocked selflessness will be peeled away with each set of effort through contemplation. With the veiling factors peeled away, selflessness grounded in truth will become more apparent, will become more visible. There will come a time when the last subtle veil preventing empirical knowledge is gone. Selflessness would become empirically experienced. That empirical experience is called true path, the fourth of the four truths. Then there is nothing but for that knowledge to move swimmingly fast toward Buddhahood. The mind which has gained empirical experience of truth will also become the true jewel of Dharma, which is the source of Buddha and Sangha.

This true path, which is also true Dharma, is constantly counteracting different layers of conception of true existence. Even after direct empirical knowledge there are things to be abandoned, things to be

eradicated on the path of meditation and so on. Each time the knowledge of truth, which is true Dharma and true path, is applied it is busy eradicating something. Finally it will eradicate a negativity permanently. That permanent eradication of objects to be abandoned is called true cessation. There are many layers of true cessations to be gained.

Through the jewel of Dharma, the direct antidote does away with an object to be abandoned. As a result, one gains true cessation permanent cessation or elimination. That person then keeps on applying the jewel of Dharma and keeps on gaining different states of cessation. As a result the person who has these two has become true Sangha, that individual person has become a true Sangha.

When this newly born Sangha keeps on applying Dharma, which is direct knowledge of emptiness, and applies it to many different layers of conception of true existence and the latencies of the conception of true existence then that Sangha member keeps progressing on the path from ground to ground. They will pass through the ten grounds. On each ground there is something to be eradicated with the antidote of the jewel of Dharma. When that object to be eradicate is permanently eradicated, another level of true cessation is achieved. Continuing this process, that Sangha keeps going high and higher on the paths and stages until they finally remove the last remnant of obstructions to omniscience. When that is finally removed, that Sangha person, blessed with the jewel of Dharma, will become a Buddha. So Dharma is the mother that produces Buddhas and Sangha.

Whether we approach Dharma through this Lamrim reaching, or we approach Dharma on the discourse of the four truths, all teachings ultimately lead the practitioner to spiritual awakening. When we talk about the four truths, true suffering and true origin of suffering are things that have afflicted us. Therefore it says know suffering and eradicate origin of suffering. But with what? With true path. If you follow true path which refers to a spiritual experience, empirical knowledge of the ultimate truth and that knowledge of real truth will sever the origin of suffering. Origin of suffering, like all other truths, is characterised by four attributes. The source of all suffering is that fundamental distortion that is deeply embedded at the moment. However that source of all will be bombarded by the direct knowledge of truth, the jewel of Dharma. With that, true cessation is achieved.

It is really engaging to be able to think about these issues and how liberation is possible given that distortion is baseless, wisdom is grounded in reality and so on. For example, when you see your own skandas/aggregates, do they appear to you as if they have a true nature? When we are not non-analytical, when we are carefree then our aggregates just seem to be there by themselves, causelessly free from any conditions, self-instituted.

When we think carefully then it becomes quite clear that our aggregates, which seem to be somewhat causelessly inherent and self-instituted, in fact is very much a result of a cause. These aggregates cannot come into being without preceding multiple causes. One of the causes of aggregates is this human aggregates. Human life is a higher form of life, therefore these aggregates stemmed from dependently-originated aggregates. Despite this being a higher form of life, still this life remains susceptible to experiencing sickness, suffering and all that. Considering all these, our aggregates cannot be inherent.

The aggregates which are themselves dependent on their causes, are the basis of imputation of person, the basis of identification of the person. What is called person? In Buddhist metaphysics, person is not just a human, it means all sentient beings. A sentient being is a person, that which is able to perform functions, do deeds. A person is labelled dependent on the aggregates, which are the basis of designation.

Whilst I'm not here, you could still come yourself and do half an hour meditation and every effort made in meditation leaves indelible imprints, very rare imprints. Please keep doing your best. You could do any kind of mediation as well as Tara meditation that I gave to you during the mandala construction. You could do the same thing or any other meditations.

For example if you do Tara meditation, it would be good for this life and more importantly for future lives. Any positive connection you have will ensure immediate material success in the material world and more importantly it will establish deeper spiritual connect to the point of being guided by Tara herself, or being born in her pure land and so on.